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Georges Rouault, Head of Christ, 1937

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Georges Rouault
French (1871-1958)
Head of Christ, 1937

Aquatint

12 ½ x 8 ½ in.

Gift of Mrs. Ray Smith, Jr., 91.22



ere we meet a flesh and blood, thick-bearded Jesus, whose manly features time and toil have etched into the face of his erect figure. Rouault depicts a truly human savior and God. Jesus is the revealer of the Father and of the divine plan of mercy for the universe, and so his very flesh shines luminous in the dark world. But his divine light is truly human and thus is cut through with a shadow he shares with the surrounding gloom. His eye is closed or cast down since his divine revelation grows and buds first in the secret thoughts of his heart. Only then does his flesh gleam with it. The bright patch of open sky at the upper left splitting the dark that envelopes him reminds us of the heavens that opened at his baptism, when the Father claimed him as his Son, the revealer to whom all should listen. Thus, Jesus is never alone without his heavenly Father, even in his darkest hour, even as the clouds gather to shrink to a small hole the channel through which heaven and earth communicate. That bright patch of sky and the hint of a halo on Jesus' head remind us that the wood of the cross along the right side of the panel is the place of Jesus' glorification, even if it is his time to sink to the depths of pain and death. He seems to contemplate those depths with quiet, reflective dignity and courage, for his workman's body stands erect, even though already half naked, and turned toward the cross. It is at this moment, his last before the final torture begins, that the Son of God and Son of Man brings to ripeness his decision to save the world by suffering love, a love that is divine and eternal and yet has already begun to suffer in human flesh, as the hint of blood in his hair drips from wounds dug by the crown of thorns. The bright glory of God and humanity coming together breaks through only from the darksome shadow of death. Jesus Christ pauses to gather himself just before living this out in his body and soul.

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